

Don't Stop Believing by TolkienScholar

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Pairings: J. Hopper/Joyce B.

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Summary: After Bob's death, Joyce thinks she's had her last chance with love. But as she tries to move on with her life alone, she finds that Jim Hopper is always there at just the moment she needs him. Is it possible he might be more than just a good friend? A collection of oneshots written for the 2018 Caesar's Palace Shipping Week.

1. Owner of a Lonely Heart

Caesar's Palace Shipping Week Prompt: Soulmates. Also fulfills Caesar's Palace Emotions Challenge, Prompt 15: Déjà vu.

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Setting: December 14, 1984; Tag to the end of Ep. 2x9

Owner of a Lonely Heart

Joyce shivers, wondering if it's worth wasting the gas to get back inside her car and run the heat. The weather isn't bad for mid-December Indiana—the Snow Ball has had to get along without any snow this year—but it isn't ideal for standing outside, either. She promised to give Will some space, though, and the parking lot outside the gym is exactly as far away from her son as she's willing to get.

The music from inside comes to her as a muted throbbing. She wonders if Will has found anyone to dance with, and she has to suppress the urge to go to one of the windows and check. *Space*, she reminds herself. *He's fine. It's a school dance, not an encounter with a monster that's trying to kill him.*

She remembers her middle school days, though. The Snow Ball is a tradition that dates back to her time in school, and there was just as much pressure back then as there is now. To the middle school mind, if you didn't find your soulmate at the Snow Ball, you were pretty much doomed to be single for life.

Joyce doesn't believe in soulmates. She's seen enough of life to know that it's never that simple, that tidy. There's no one special person out there that the universe is guiding you towards; there's just you, struggling to make the right choice in a world where only the wrong

choices are easy. Lonnie Byers had been an easy choice. She'd married him because he was there, and when he'd turned out to be an abusive drunk who ultimately ran out on her, he hadn't shattered any pretty illusions because she hadn't had any to begin with.

But Bob Newby had been different. Bob had kissed her in the dark and danced her around the kitchen to cheesy love songs. He'd showed up at work to take her "out to lunch" in the parking lot and made crazy plans to take her away to Maine. He'd awakened dreams in her she'd never thought she'd have, dreams that maybe she was meant for love after all, even if she had missed it the first time around.

Joyce lets out a soft moan of frustration as she realizes where her thoughts have taken her again. She rubs at her temples, trying to massage away the wistful thoughts and, most of all, the image that inevitably follows: Bob's torn, bleeding body, nearly obscured by the slimy gray monster dogs that had no faces, only hideous, gaping mouths tearing him to shreds. What might have been doesn't matter anymore.

"Hey."

She looks up. It's Hopper. She smiles wanly, hoping he didn't see her misery and knowing that he did. "Hey."

"Thought I might find you out here."

"Will wanted me to give him some space, so I'm giving him a few feet." She chuckles. It sounds ridiculous, but Hopper, of all people, understands.

He grins and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. "What do you say? I'm pretty sure that Mr. Cooper retired in the 70s, so..." He puts a cigarette in his mouth and lights it. "We might be okay."

He inhales deeply and passes the cigarette to her. She puts it in her mouth and immediately starts to cough; she's forgotten how strong he likes them. She's swept by a feeling of déjà vu; their strict old teacher's reprimands are all that's missing from the picture. She smiles.

"How are you holding up?"

His gentle voice brings her crashing back. "You know," she answers.

"Yeah. That feeling never goes away," he replies, with the honesty she's really come to respect. He pauses. "It is true what they say, you know. Every day it does get a little easier."

Joyce looks up at him, unable to speak. After a moment, he wraps his arm around her, and she buries her head in his chest. She's not sure she's ready to believe him. How can it get easier to let go of hopes and dreams you'd only just started to allow yourself to believe in?

She should have known better. Should have known better than to believe she might get a fairytale ending. Life is never so easy, so perfect. She's no princess, and there's no prince out there waiting to ride in when she needs him. There's just her, grieving and worried and exhausted and oh, so terribly alone.

She burrows deeper into Hopper's chest and cries.

2. Bridge Over Troubled Water

Caesar's Palace Shipping Week Prompt: Safe. Also fulfills Caesar's Palace Emotions Challenge, Prompt 10: Frenzied.

Disclaimer: *Stranger Things* is the property of the Duffer brothers. No copyright infringement is intended. The title of this piece is taken from the song of the same title by Simon and Garfunkle.

Setting: May 25, 1985

Bridge Over Troubled Water

Will hates thunderstorms.

It isn't like the "flashbacks" he used to have last year, though he must have assured her of that fifty times before she finally believed him. He isn't *in* the Upside Down, with the slime and the rot and the air full of floating ash. He just has a feeling, an overwhelming urge every time the lightning flashes to prove to himself that he's *not*. He'll stand at the window staring up at the black outlines of the tree branches silhouetted against the blinding sky. Joyce knows what he's looking for. In the Upside Down, those flares of light would have revealed the enormous, spidery form of the Mind Flayer. Not seeing it reminds Will that it's over.

Until the lightning comes again.

At first she tried reasoning with him. If the first flash revealed nothing, then there was nothing there. He didn't need to check again and again. He was safe. The Gate was closed. The Mind Flayer was gone.

"Mm-hmm," was the only answer she could get out of him. "I know, Mom." But he never moved from the window, and he never took his eyes off the sky.

Then she tried distracting him. She pulled out every game she could find from his and Jonathan's closets; she sat down at the kitchen table and attempted to draw with him, though his extraordinary talent definitely hadn't come from her; once she even invited his friends over on a day she knew a storm was in the forecast, hoping that Dungeons and Dragons would distract him where nothing else could. The result was always the same. With every crash of thunder, he would jump up and run to the window to catch the next lightning flash. Even Mike, who had always been unfailingly patient with Will, got annoyed, and Will made her promise never to do anything like that again.

But she didn't stop trying. The next time a storm hit, she and Jonathan set up a card table in the living room and covered the outside with so many blankets that no glimpse of lightning could possibly get through. Jonathan put his mixtape in the stereo and turned it up loud enough to drown out the thunder, and they all crowded inside the makeshift fort, Will sandwiched between her and Jonathan. He was as rigid as a board. She pulled him against her chest and rubbed his back, trying to make him relax, but it did no good. Within less than five minutes he had shot to his feet, flipping the table over and scattering the blankets on his way to the window. But that wasn't when she gave up. It was when Will—her sweet, mild Will—turned from the window and cursed her out, his gentle features contorted with a rage she didn't recognize and his mouth spewing words he must have stored up from the years of Lonnie's tirades Joyce had hoped he'd never heard.

So she's finally resorted to letting him kneel on the couch and stare out the window as long as the storm lasts. It's not a healthy solution, but it's the only one she's got. They both know she has enough unhealthy coping methods of her own.

She's deep into one of them now, dragging on the end of a cigarette while she stands on the porch staring up at the dark clouds closing in from the west. It's going to be a long night. Jonathan is over at Nancy's, leaving her to sit up with Will until the storms end, which is supposed to be around 1:00 AM. Of course, he wants her to just leave him alone, but she can't go to bed knowing he's still up staring anxiously at the sky. She wouldn't be able to sleep anyway.

The rumble of an approaching motor disrupts her brooding, and she looks toward the road just in time to see Hopper's huge brown Blazer pull up. She feels a rush of worry until she catches sight of Eleven—Jane, that is—in the passenger seat. It's a social visit, then. She grins, feeling unreasonably happy to see them.

"We're not intruding, are we?" Hopper calls as he stops the car. "I thought we'd come wait out the storm at your house instead of in our rickety old cabin."

"Of course not!" she calls back. "Glad to have you!"

As Hopper climbs out of the driver's side, Joyce notices that he's looking good. With some help from Joyce and Mrs. Wheeler, Jane has undertaken to learn how to cook, and the switch from Eggos and TV dinners is already starting to make a difference. He's got a long way to go to get rid of that beer belly, but the little girl has made a good start.

Not such a little girl, either, Joyce realizes as Hopper helps Jane down from the cab. Whether it's the new diet or the unstoppable force of puberty, Hopper's adopted daughter is shooting up and filling out at an astonishing rate. She must have grown at least two inches since the last time Joyce saw her, and her soft brown curls are just brushing the tops of her shoulders now. She can see the outline of breasts under the girl's T-shirt, and she reminds herself to make sure Hopper's bought some training bras for her. It wouldn't be a bad idea for him to keep some tampons on hand, either, she thinks. It probably won't be long before Jane needs them.

They reach the porch, and Hopper greets her with a quick hug. By now Will is outside too, and he throws his arms around Jane; Joyce notes with amusement that he's almost a full head shorter than she is. The first flash of lightning appears just as they begin to talk, and Will breaks off suddenly, casting an anxious glance up at the sky. Joyce puts an arm around him and steers him inside. She looks back and catches a glimpse of Hopper's concerned face as he and Jane follow her.

"So he does this every time it storms?"

"Every single time."

Sitting across from him at the kitchen table, Joyce tells Hopper everything, about Will's anxiety and her numerous failed attempts to help him. From the living room, they can both hear Jane patiently trying to draw Will away from the window, though after twenty minutes, he's stopped even responding to what she's saying.

Hopper is silent, scratching thoughtfully at his stubbly chin. She's come to rely so heavily on his judgment these past two years; between his common sense and his sheer bullheadedness, there's doesn't seem to be any problem he can't solve, even one from another dimension.

At last, he nods. "I have an idea. I just don't think you're going to like it."

She winces. "Please tell me it's better than 'Stand up to it and tell it to go away.'" The reference to Bob's plan to stop Will's "flashbacks" is half in jest—and even the fact that she's able to joke about it is progress—but she's worried, too. Following Bob's advice was what had allowed the Mind Flayer to take possession of Will in the first place.

"It's a little better than that," Hopper answers. "But it's not too far off." He reaches out and takes her hand before she has time to react to his statement. "Listen to me, Joyce. Bob—Bob's advice would have been right if Will's problem had been psychological, which is how we were all treating it at the time. He couldn't have known what was happening to him was real. But if Will's fear of storms really is just in his head, then the only way to stop it is to stop feeding the fear."

She nods, not looking at him.

"Someone's got to get him away from that window." He takes a deep breath. "But it doesn't have to be you. Let me take the lead on this one."

She looks up at him, the fire back in her eyes. "I burned a demon out of my son last year, Hop. I think I can handle this."

"Yeah, and you almost got strangled to death in the process," he counters. His voice softens, and he tightens his hold on her hand. "Haven't you been through enough, Joyce?"

Looking earnestly into his eyes, she gives him the only answer she can: "Hasn't Will?"

He sighs. "Together, then?" he asks.

"Together."

Hopper's plan, as he explains it to Will a few minutes later, isn't quite as drastic as she expected. Will won't be "quitting cold turkey," so to speak; instead, once a thunder clap hits, he'll have to sit with Joyce and wait for several seconds before going to the window. Hopper will keep track of the time and gradually increase the waiting period until Will is no longer at the window when the lightning flashes. At that point, the repeated exposure to the fear will finally begin to convince Will's brain that there's nothing to be afraid of.

"Before we get started, though, I want to lay two ground rules," Hopper says, fixing a stern look on Will's unresponsive profile. "First, you can choose to sit and wait quietly with your Mom, or you can choose to have me grab you and hold you down. I think you can figure out which is the better choice. Right?"

Will nods, his face expressionless. He hasn't said a word the whole time Hopper's been talking, just continued to stare stone-faced out the window. There's nothing to tell her how he feels about the plan—Afraid? Angry? Indifferent? Despairing? She hates not knowing what he's thinking, hates how inaccessible to her this whole experience has made him. If she lives to be a hundred, she'll never understand the horrors he's been through, and that knowledge puts a barrier between them she doesn't know how to breach.

"And second," Hopper continues, then breaks off. He seizes Will by the shoulders and pulls him to face him, forcing Will to look him in the eyes. "Second, you got any violence you need to get rid of, you take it out on me. You wanna kick, punch, scream, cuss, whatever you gotta do, kid, but you do it to me and not to your Mom. You

understand me?"

Will nods, and for the first time Joyce sees an emotion on his face: fear. Fear... and perhaps a touch of sadness. Because Will, of all people, shouldn't have to be told these things. Will, who adores her more than anything in the world. Will, who has never been violent in his life. These shouldn't be things that need to be said to her Will, and he knows that.

Then there's a flash of lightning, and Will pulls away from Hopper to look up at the sky.

"Good," Hopper grunts, looking at his watch. "Let's go."

It plays out about as Hopper said it would: the waiting, the struggling against them, the kicking and screaming. There's an anxious part of Joyce that's waiting to see some sign of supernatural possession returning; she keeps putting a hand to his forehead to check his temperature, blessing the heat and sweat that prove to her he's still her son. But as the night wears on, his struggling gradually grows less vehement, more subdued. And by the time the rumbles of thunder are beginning to fade into the distance, Will has fallen quietly asleep in the space between them, his sweaty head resting on Hopper's arm. Jane is dozing too, sitting on the floor against Joyce's leg, the trail of crusty dried blood under her left nostril a testament to her role in keeping Will still. It had taken all of them, but they had done it.

"Thank you," Joyce whispers. "Thank you."

Hopper reaches over and squeezes her knee, the only part of her he can reach without disturbing Will. "We've won a battle. We may not have won the war. He's got a long way to go before he'll be completely over what that place did to him." He looks down at Will, a wistful look on his face. "He may never feel completely safe again."

"I know," she answers, slipping her hand into his. "I'm not sure I will either. All I know is that I'll always feel safer whenever you're here."

A/N: The observant reader might notice that Hopper's suggestion

to help Will closely resembles Exposure/Response Prevention (ERP) therapy. Although what Will is struggling with is actually PTSD, there is some overlap in his behaviors with OCD, of which I am a long-time sufferer, which allowed me to draw on my own experience in writing this piece. The premise of ERP is to expose a person to a stimulus that causes anxiety (obsession) and not letting them complete the action (compulsion) they usually use to relieve the anxiety. This reduces the power of the anxiety response by retraining the brain not to fear the stimulus.